

Review**Akron Symphony in Finnish & Russian music
with Cynthia Warren & Martina Filjak (October 26)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Though the Finns and the Russians have often had a complicated relationship in recent times, their musical icons — Sibelius and Tchaikovsky — made agreeable partners on Saturday evening's Akron Symphony program in E.J. Thomas Hall when Christopher Wilkins led Sibelius's *Finlandia*, *The Swan of Tuonela* and *Symphony No. 7* and Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1*. Two extraordinary soloists, the ASO's English hornist Cynthia Warren and Croatian pianist Martina Filjak (left), were out in front for the occasion.

The first half of the program belonged to Jan Sibelius, beginning with a robust performance of his patriotic tone poem, *Finlandia*, composed for an 1899 tableau, *Suomi*, that advocated the overthrow of Russian rule. As in the previous ASO concert, winds and brass were elevated on risers, which gave those sections more prominence. But with a smaller orchestra this time, sections didn't blend with each other quite as well. Percussion and brass stood out, sometimes engulfing the strings.

Sibelius set to music four legends of Lemminkainen from the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*. In the composer's words, "Tuonela, the land of death, the hell of Finnish mythology, is surrounded by a broad river with black waters and rapid currents, on which the Swan of Tuonela floats majestically, singing." There's more to the legend, but *The Swan of Tuonela* contents itself with painting the scene of the river and the swan in a gorgeously mournful melody for English horn and orchestra.

Cynthia Warren played it with stately demeanor and elegant tone, moving in and out of the orchestral texture as smoothly as a swan drifting through water. Cellist Miles Richardson contributed a soulful solo of his own. Applause began even before Wilkins put his baton down and a long ovation and volleys of bouquets rewarded Warren's efforts — many of them apparently from her colleagues in the orchestra.

The Finnish half of the concert concluded with Sibelius's last symphony, a single-movement work that was completed in Italy in 1924 and seems to have surprised the composer by the way it mystically wrote itself. As the work slowly unfolds, themes eventually organize themselves from strands of motives, like polypeptides forming more more complex

molecules. Climaxes build organically from those themes only to resolve musical tension before the music goes on to the next inevitable event.

The results are fascinating throughout the symphony's short, 25-minute duration. With the exception of some unfocused moments in the violins and a few passing episodes where sections were out of phase with one another, Wilkins and the orchestra made a strong case for a piece that still sounds fresh and experimental. Once again, early applauders set off a volley of clapping while the last notes were still fading from memory (what's with that?) A second wave of applause affirmed the audience's positive response.

Martina Filjak was gold medal winner in the 2009 Cleveland International Piano Competition. She has proven in the last four years that competition winners can go on to launch stellar careers, and her performance of "Tchaik One" on Saturday evening only ratcheted up her reputation among local fans.

Filjak took a leisurely, spacious approach to this most famous concerto, a pace that allowed her both to linger over its lyrical moments and create contrasting bursts of volatility when the music heated up. Playing with a strong, even tone that constitutionally avoided harshness, she held her own easily against the orchestra. Her first movement *ca-denza* began calmly then drew us in as the drama increased. Applause followed, which Filjak gracefully acknowledged from the bench

The second movement was charming and playful, graced with lovely flute, oboe and cello solos by Sandra Hughes, Terry Orcutt and Miles Richardson, and a hushed return of the theme in the piano. In the finale, Filjak played with precise articulation, nailed flawless volleys of octaves and managed to play Tchaikovsky's show-stopping tune with dignity, not sentimentality. Wilkins and the orchestra were fine, flexible partners.

A huge and well-deserved ovation ensued, and multiple bouquets appeared (Akron's florists must have been smiling on Saturday!) Martina Filjak responded with a brief, lyrical encore, a movement from Schumann's *Fantasiestücke*.

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